Chapter 14
The Role of Leaders in Facilitating Healing After Organizational Trauma

Lynda Byrd-Poller
The George Washington University, USA

Jennifer L. Farmer
Renewed Mindset LLC, USA

Valerie Ford
ISP Global Communications LLC, USA

ABSTRACT
Effective 21st century organizations build cultures that adapt to an unpredictable and changing environment. However, organizational change can be traumatic. This chapter endeavors to make a contribution to knowledge about organizational trauma and leader behaviors - specifically what leaders can do when there are signs of trauma in the organization due to organizational change. Trauma is a psychosocial response to a perceived or actual event beyond one’s control that results in personal feelings of overwhelming helplessness. Moreover, this chapter will examine how leader behaviors influence employee engagement and professional identity. The chapter provides background information about employee engagement in general and its positioning inside a broader framework called work-related well-being. The authors also link professional identity to the trauma of organizational change.

INTRODUCTION
Leaders are constantly responding to the external pressures of change and the internal choreography that aims to improve organizational performance. External factors such as changing demographics, government mandates, industry regulations, technological advancements, socio-cultural shifts, and global competition, all present unique challenges that leave organizations in a constant state of change. This
change leaves individuals within organizations grasping for a sense of stability, meaning, and direction; but even when that wish is granted, there may also be a set of traumatic responses that follow.

Research on organizational change often focuses on employee resistance (Piderit, 2000). However, trauma resulting from organizational change is rarely explored. As a result, this chapter discusses the nature of trauma in an organization in search of stability, well-being and improved performance. This chapter will serve as the introduction to the authors’ intended research in the field of organizational trauma. When change invokes trauma, the authors posit that there is a negative impact on professional identity and employee engagement. Consequently, leaders must enact certain key behaviors to restore a healthy working environment. Lastly, this chapter will provide insights about the role of the leader in restoring and cultivating a healthy organizational culture.

BACKGROUND

In management literature, studies have demonstrated time and again that the organization’s climate influences the psychological well-being of its employees and, therefore, the health of the organization (Vivian & Hormann, 2015). This knowledge has gone beyond concerns about the failure to provide for individual needs and has identified conditions in which the psychological health of employees can decline even when given challenging and interesting tasks. One such condition that threatens individual and organizational health is trauma. The trauma concept was first introduced in the clinical discipline and describes an emotional response to a terrible event, such as an accident or natural disaster (De Klerk, 2007). Organizational trauma typically focuses on the collective and is part of the organizational development domain. In organizations, trauma may result from a single devastating event, the effects of several harmful events, or cumulative trauma (Vivian & Hormann, 2015).

A review of the literature demonstrates that one of the most glaring issues concerning the construct of organizational trauma is that there is not a single, unifying definition for the concept. Much of the current research concerning organizational trauma emphasizes the responses to catastrophic events and has been studied at different levels of analysis and in varying contexts. For example, prior studies have focused on cumulative trauma disorders that define and describe trauma in terms of physical ailments such as carpal tunnel syndrome and other health issues (Brenner, Fairris & Ruser, 2004). Other studies define organizational trauma as a collective experience that leaves the organization temporarily vulnerable or permanently damaged (Vivian & Hormann, 2005).

Still, other scholars describe organizational trauma as a process in which organizations experience trauma in the form of dysfunctional patterns that can be seen in individuals, groups and behaviors in the organization (Kahn, 2003). Finally, De Klerk (2007) conceptualizes trauma by focusing on unresolved emotional trauma and how it blocks the capacity of individuals to be effective within the organization. All of these definitions of organizational trauma are broad, overarching concepts that provide little direction for practitioners who want to improve organizational performance. As a result, leaders who are concerned about trauma in their organizations must first determine which definition to use and then tailor that to their specific organization.